

Message Text

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S E C R E T STATE 308365

LIMDIS

FOLLOWING REPEAT TEGUCIGALPA 5746 ACTION STATE INFO GUATEMALA
MANAGUA SAN JOSE SAN SALVADOR DEC 8.

QUOTE S E C R E T TEGUCIGALPA 5746

LIMDIS

EO 11652 GDS
TAGS: PBOR, PINT, OAS, HO, ES
SUBJECT: ARMS RESTRAINT AND THE HONDURAS/EL SALVADOR NEGOTIATIONS

REF: (A) TEGUCIGALPA 5556, (B) STATE 290037, (C) 76 TEGUCIGALPA 3116

1. SUMMARY: HONDURAS SEEMS INTERESTED IN CONTINUED EXPANSION OF
ITS AIR FORCE THROUGH ACQUISITION OF ADDITIONAL SUPER MYSTERE JET
FIGHTERS, WHICH INCLUDE U.S.-ORIGIN ENGINES. IN LIGHT OF THE
FORTHCOMING HONDURAN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS WITH EL SALVADOR,
APPROVAL OF ANY SUCH PURCHASES COULD (A) ADVERSELY AFFECT THE
CLIMATE FOR THESE NEGOTIATIONS, (B) FURTHER ENCOURAGE EL SALVADOR
AND OTHER CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES TO CONSIDER SIMILAR PURCHASES,
AND (C) BE INTERPRETED BY THE GOH AND OTHERS AS INDICATING A

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"TILT" TOWARDS HONDURAS. RECENT BORDER INCIDENT (REF A)
DEMONSTRATED THE EMOTIONAL NATURE OF THE DISPUTE.
NEVERTHELESS, FORMAL REFUSAL OF AN ARMS TRANSFER REQUEST
COULD ADVERSELY AFFECT OUR GOOD RELATIONS WITH HONDURAS.
NONETHELESS AND ON BALANCE, THE EMBASSY BELIEVES THE ARGUMENTS
FOR ARMS RESTRAINT ARE CONVINCING WHEN WEIGHED AGAINST
OUR OVERALL CENTRAL AMERICAN INTERESTS AND HONDURAS'

MORE COMPELLING NEEDS TO USE ITS SCARCE RESOURCES TO IMPROVE THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF ITS PEOPLE. THE EMBASSY RECOMMENDS THAT FURTHER FURTHER SUPER MYSTERE PURCHASES BE DISAPPROVED AND SUGGESTS AN ATTEMPT BE MADE TO INFORMALLY DISCOURAGE THEM. SEE PARA 10 BELOW FOR COMMENT ON NOVEMBER 11 ACTION MEMO TO THE SECRETARY. END SUMMARY

2. BY DINT OF EXTRAORDINARY EFFORTS AND EXPENDITURES, HONDURAS NOW HAS WHAT IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED THE LARGEST AND BEST TACTICAL AIR FORCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA. WHILE IN RECENT YEARS ONLY 8-9 PERCENT OF THE NATIONAL BUDGET HAS BEEN FOR DEFENSE, MANY ARMS PURCHASES HAVE BEEN MADE ON AN AD HOC BASIS AND ARE NOT INCLUDED IN THE PUBLISHED BUDGET. RECENT ACQUISITION OF TWO MORE SUPER MYSTERES WITH U.S.-ORIGIN ENGINES ALREADY GIVES HONDURAS A SIGNIFICANT FLEET, IN CENTRAL AMERICAN TERMS, OF SUPERSONIC JET FIGHTERS. THE HONDURAN AIR FORCE (HAF) CONTINUES TO LEAD ITS NEIGHBORS IN TOTAL NUMBER OF AIRCRAFT AND IN THE GREATEST NUMBER OF FIGHTERS AND CLOSE AIR SUPPORT AIRCRAFT (35). THE HAF IS INTERESTED IN REPLACING ITS ANCIENT CORSAIRS, POSSIBLY WITH T-28'S OR OV-10S, AND IT IS ALSO LIKELY THAT MORE SUPER MYSTERE PURCHASES ARE BEING CONSIDERED.

3. THE EMBASSY HAS EXPRESSED ITS CONCERN ON SEVERAL
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LOCATIONS (E.G. REF C) THAT HONDURAS' ACQUISITIONS COULD LEAD TO AN INCREASED ARMS BUILD-UP IN CENTRAL AMERICA. WHILE THERE HAS NOT YET BEEN AN EXTRAORDINARY INCREASE IN MILITARY AIRCRAFT NUMBERS, THE AIR FORCES OF THE REGION HAVE MADE SOME IMPROVEMENTS THROUGH MODERNIZATION AND THE REPLACEMENT OF ATTRITIONAL LOSSES. IN ADDITION, THERE ARE INDICATIONS, AS REPORTED BY DAO, THAT EL SALVADOR IS ACTIVELY SEEKING NEW AIRCRAFT (PERHAPS F5E'S) AND MAY ALREADY HAVE ACQUIRED AIR-TO-AIR MISSILES. AS THE DEPARTMENT WILL RECALL, THE GOH'S AIRCRAFT EXPANSION EFFORT BEGAN AFTER THE GOES BOUGHT ITS OURAGANS. THE EMBASSY BELIEVES THIS CONTINUED SEARCH FOR NEWER, MORE SOPHISTICATED AND EXPENSIVE MILITARY EQUIPMENT IS A POTENTIALLY DESTABILIZING FACTOR WITHIN THE REGION, AND THAT IT IS ESPECIALLY SO AT A TIME WHEN HONDURAS AND EL SALVADOR ARE TO BEGIN NEGOTIATIONS SOON.

4. THE U.S. POLICY OF STRICT "EVENHANDEDNESS" AS REGARDS THE MERITS OF THIS DISPUTE AND SUPPORT FOR THE CONTENDING PARTIES HAS PREVENTED THE U.S. FROM BEING DRAWN IN ON ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER. WHILE THE BORDER DISPUTE HAS NOT BEEN RESOLVED, BOTH SIDES ACCEPT THE FACT THAT THE

U.S. DOES NOT FAVOR ONE OR THE OTHER. THE BASIC PREMISE OF THIS EVENHANDEDNESS POLICY IS THAT IT MUST BE THE TWO PARTIES THEMSELVES WHO FINALLY DECIDE WHAT POLITICAL ARRANGEMENTS CAN BE MADE THAT EACH CAN LIVE WITH. EL SALVADOR'S RENUNCIATION OF U.S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE HAS MADE THE POLICY MORE DIFFICULT TO IMPLEMENT, HOWEVER. THE EMBASSY BELIEVES THAT BASIC EVENHANDEDNESS POLICY SHOULD CONTINUE. WHILE WE NO LONGER OFFER EQUAL MILITARY PACKAGES, EVERY EFFORT MUST BE MADE TO MAINTAIN THE PERCEPTION THAT THE U.S. NEITHER FAVORS NOR SUPPORTS ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER.

5. ADDITIONAL SUPER MYSTERE SALES TO HONDURAS WITH OUR APPROVAL AT THIS TIME COULD BE INTERPRETED AS A
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"TILT" IN FAVOR OF HONDURAS VIS-A-VIS EL SALVADOR AND MIGHT BE SO INTERPRETED BY THE GOH AND OTHERS IN THE LIGHT OF OUR HUMAN RIGHTS AND MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROBLEMS WITH THE GOES, WHEN CONSIDERED ALONGSIDE HONDURAS' COMPARATIVELY GOOD HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD AND CONTINUING LARGE U.S. ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS. NEITHER DOES APPROVAL OF SUPER MYSTERE SALES SEEM AN APPROPRIATE WAY TO RECOGNIZE A COUNTRY'S OBSERVANCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, ESPECIALLY WHEN THESE PURCHASES DIVERT SCARCE RESOURCES FROM DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND MAY CONTRIBUTE TO RENEWED CONFLICT. THE EMBASSY IS PLEASED TO NOTE THAT RECENT IG REVIEW (REF B PARA 5) OF HONDURAS PARM AGREED WITH THIS POSITION.

6. HOWEVER, REFUSAL OF NEW AIRCRAFT SALES TO HONDURAS COULD ALSO CAUSE ADVERSE REACTION AMONG THE HONDURAN PEOPLE, WHO FEEL THEY HAVE THE RIGHT TO DEFEND THEMSELVES, NOT TO MENTION HARD-LINE MILITARY OFFICERS (INCLUDING THE AIR FORCE CHIEF WHO BELIEVES HIS MISSION IS TO BUILD THE BIGGEST AND BEST AIR FORCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND WHO ALSO BELIEVES, WITH SOME REASON, THAT HE WILL BE REPLACED IF HE DOES NOT DO SO). WHILE MANY HONDURANS WOULD AGREE IN PRINCIPLE ON BENEFITS OF ARMS RESTRAINTS, AT THIS PARTICULAR MOMENT (REF A), A FORMAL, NEGATIVE DECISION ON OUR PART WOULD BE RESENTED AND VIGOROUSLY OPPOSED, BOTH PUBLICALLY AND PRIVATELY.

7. THE EMBASSY SUGGESTS THAT INFORMAL ATTEMPTS BE MADE TO DISCOURAGE CONSIDERATION OF MORE SUPER MYSTERE PURCHASES, BASED UPON OUR BELIEF THAT THESE SALES CAN ONLY CREATE MORE PRESSURE ON THE GOES TO SEEK NEW EQUIPMENT, AT A TIME WHEN RENEWED NEGOTIATIONS ARE TO BEGIN ON RESOLVING THE BORDER DISPUTE. SUCH AN INITIATIVE MIGHT EITHER
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BE LINKED TO A SIMILAR POLICY OF RESTRAINT VIS-A-VIS EL SALVADOR OR ORIGINATE FROM THE OAS AND LEGITIMATELY BE LINKED TO THE BEGINNING OF NEGOTIATIONS. AN OAS CALL FOR ARMS RESTRAINT DIRECTED AT BOTH SIDES MIGHT BE SUCCESSFUL, ESPECIALLY IF PRECEDED BY INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS.

8. SUCH EFFORTS MIGHT BE EVEN MORE APPROPRIATE AT THIS TIME INASMUCH AS THE OAS OBSERVER TEAM IS NOW SCHEDULED TO END ITS MISSION ON JANUARY 15. THE EMBASSY BELIEVES THAT IF THE OBSERVERS ARE WITHDRAWN, THE POSSIBILITY OF RENEWED CONFLICT ALONG THE BORDER, WHICH COULD EASILY ESCALATE, WILL BECOME MUCH GREATER. NEGOTIATIONS THEMSELVES ARE LIKELY TO BE TIME-CONSUMING AND DIFFICULT, WITH SUCCESS ONLY PROBLEMATICAL.

9. TO SUM UP, THE EMBASSY IS NOT OPTIMISTIC OVER THE PROSPECTS THAT THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS WILL BE SUCCESSFUL, BUT BELIEVES THAT A POLICY OF ARMS RESTRAINT COULD HELP IMPROVE THEIR CHANCES FOR SUCCESS.

10. THIS CABLE WAS READY FOR TRANSMITTAL JUST AS A COPY OF ACTION MEMO OF NOVEMBER 10 TO THE SECRETARY (NO. 7728666) WAS RECEIVED HERE BY POUCH. WHILE INFORMAL DISCOURAGEMENT MAY NO LONGER BE FEASIBLE, THE EMBASSY BELIEVES THE DEPARTMENT SHOULD HAVE INFORMATION IN FOREGOING PARAGRAPHS FOR FUTURE USE. WHILE TRANSFER OF TWO MORE AIRPLANES IN AND OF THEMSELVES MAY BE A "MINOR" ISSUE, THE EMBASSY NOTES THAT, ASIDE FROM BELIZE, THIS DISPUTE IS THE ONLY ONE IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE THAT COULD LEAD TO ANOTHER OUTBREAK OF HOSTILITIES. THE EMBASSY WOULD APPRECIATE BEING INFORMED OF DECISION TAKEN. JARAMILLO UNQUOTE VANCE

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